DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 395 EA 008 186

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TITLE The Effect of Partisan Elections on the Incumbent Defeat-Superintendent Turnover Relationship.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 19-23, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Board Candidates; *Boards of Education; Education; *Elections; Elementary Secondary Education; Political Affiliation; *Political Influences; Political Issues; Politics; *School Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS *Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

The political nature of educational governance has been established in other papers dealing with school board elections in states not having partisan election of school board members. The research reported in this paper was conducted in Pennsylvania, a state in which candidates for the school board must declare their party and run on a partisan ticket. This research was conducted to determine the effect of the partisan nature of the elections on the governance of the school district and, more specifically, to study the effect of the partisan nature of the election on encumbent school board member defeat and the turnover of superintendents in districts involved. Analysis of the data revealed that incumbent defeat broadly defined as the defeat of an incumbent in either the primary or general elections is the most accurate predictor of involuntary superintendent turnover. Increased predictive accuracy cannot be obtained by examining any specific category of incumbent defeat. Thus, the findings in previous studies taking place in nonpartisan school board elections were found to be equally applicable in partisan school district politics. (Author/IRT)

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EA 008 186

Presented at AERA
April 21, 1976

THE EFFECT OF PARTISAN ELECTIONS ON THE INCUMBENT DEFEAT - SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER RELATIONSHIP*

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Introduction

Until recently, the governance of public education was popularly thought of as separate from the political process. However, acceptance of this distinction is decreasing. More and more it is recognized that the governance of public education is a political process. While the association between educational governance and the political process is being accepted, the nature and the extent of the relationship between the processes is far from fully understood. If the governance of public education is a political process, is it subject to the same political pressures as is the governance of a state? Does the fact that school board members generally are not elected on a partisan basis make them less of a political creature than a fellow election ticket inhabitant who has been endorsed as a Republican, Democrat, or other party member? Are school board members who are elected on a partisan basis more political than school board members who have not been elected on a partisan basis? And, finally, what is the effect of all of this political activity exhibited by school board members upon the superintendent serving as an employee of the board of education made up of these elected school board members?

Previous presentations have established the political nature of educational governance. However, the research reported by the previous presenters was undertaken in situations not providing for a partisan nature to this political activity. In these studies reported school board elections were observed in states not having partisan election of school board members. The research reported in this paper[1] was conducted in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a state in which candidates for the school board must declare their party and run on a partisan ticket.[2] Thus, if

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partisanship is an ingredient of political activity, the school board elections in Pennsylvania may be even more political than those found in many other states. In conducting the research, we were interested in determining the effect of this partisan nature of the elections upon the governance of the school district and more specifically, we were interested in studying the effect of the partisan nature of the election upon incumbent school board member defeat and the turnover of superintendents in districts involved. Previous research[3] reported had found that school board incumbent defeat indicates that the operation of the schools has been judged inadequate by the public and that this dissatisfaction is frequently followed by the involuntary termination of the superintendent. Do school boards elected on a partisan basis reflect more accurately the needs and wishes of residents of the district than do boards not elected on a partisan basis? Does electing boards on a partisan basis make them more responsive to the demands of the constituency? If this is the case, it would seem that states electing school board members on a partisan basis would demonstrate a different relationship between incumbent school board member defeat and superintendent turnover than states electing their board members on a nonpartisan basis.

Theoretical Background

An abundance of literature reveals that a great deal of power in educational decision making rests with local school boards. The amount of power residing with the board may vary. In the small communities of Springdale studied by Vidich and Bensman[4] and Central Forks studied by Goldhammer[5], it was observed that the central leadership group in the community held many of the positions on the school board. This phenomenon was contrasted in Hunter's Regional City[6] where it was found that school board membership and educational policy determination were left to the "lower limits power personnel." However, in most of these communities, the power exercised by the school board has been viewed as nonpolitical. If political activity need be equated with partisanship there is often, in

fact, a lack of political activity at the school board level. However, it is our contention that political activity exists outside of the sphere of partisanship. Although the term politics as popularly used has rather negative connotations, a closer look displays how closely politics is tied in with the governance of school districts. Robert Dahl has defined politics as "the authoritative allocation of values."[7] Lutz and Iannaccone view politics as "the process of influence which results in an authoritative decision, having the force of law, by a governmental body such as a school board."[8] A third dimension is developed by Thomas Eliot when he says that "politics includes the making of governmental decisions, and the effort or struggle to gain or keep the power to make these decisions."[9] If the preceding are definitions of politics, they most certainly also relate to governance of public education. Thus, we find school board members directly involved as politicians in the governance of their school districts. They represent and respond to a constituency just as does any other political being.

Research reported by my predecessors on this panel has established the relationship between the political turnover of members of school boards and the subsequent involuntary turnover of superintendents in those districts experiencing board member termination. These studies have found that school board member defeat indicates a lack of satisfaction by the constituency of these board members in the operation of the schools. Furthermore, this lack of satisfaction has frequently culminated in the involuntary termination of the superintendent's contract.

The work of Lutz and Walden was conducted in states in which school board members are elected on a nonpartisan basis. Would a school board elected on a partisan basis more adequately and perhaps more concurrently reflect the wishes of the constituency? And, would it follow, therefore, that the subsequent termination of the superintendent would be affected by partisan nature of the election of board members?

A second area of research involving partisan elections was also instrumental in developing the theoretical basis of this study. Many

studies have shown voting behavior in America to be quite predictable. Certain forces act upon the voter in determining how he will vote. The most powerful of these forces is the voter's party identification. It has been estimated that about 75 percent of the electorate identify to some degree with either the Democratic or Republican parties. The majority of these party identifiers say they have regularly voted for the nominee of their party.[10]

Thus, it has been established that school district governance is a political activity. School board members do in fact respond to a constituency. Furthermore, on the basis of an abundance of research in political science a relationship has been found to exist between the party identification of a voter and that voter's behavior in the voting booth. It was expected that this voter behavior would be true in voting for school board elections as well as any other type of election.

Specifically, the objective of this study was to determine the relationship between the electoral defeat of an incumbent school board member and any subsequent involuntary turnover in the superintendency in that school district, and the degree and manner in which the partisan nature of the school board election influenced that relationship.

The Hypotheses

The hypotheses guiding this study were:

H.1. In partisan, general elections in Pennsylvania, more school board candidates win when their party wins than when the party loses.

H.2. The defeat of an incumbent school board member in Pennsylvania's partisan, general election is not necessarily reflective of community dissatisfaction with the school board and its policy to the degree that involuntary superintendent turnover results.

H.2a. The defeat of a renominated, incumbent school board member accompanied by the defeat of the rest of the incumbent's party will not signal involuntary superintendent turnover within three years.

H.2b. The defeat of an incumbent school board member in a party primary election will signal involuntary superintendent turnover within three years.

H.2c. The defeat of a renominated incumbent school board member in the partisan, general election accompanied by a victory of the rest of the incumbent's party will be the strongest indicator of involuntary superintendent turnover within three years.

In hypothesis 1, it was hypothesized that the success of a candidate in a school board election depends on the success of that candidate's party. That is, school board candidates will win more often when the rest of their party wins than when the rest of their party loses. If the party loses, the school board member is also apt to lose. A second hypothesis guiding the study was that the defeat of an incumbent school board member under varying conditions predicted superintendent turnover with differing degrees of accuracy. Defeat in the general election might possibly be indicative of future involuntary turnover in the superintendent's office. Hypothesis 2a and 2c distinguished two categories of incumbent defeat in the general election. In hypothesis 2a, it was hypothesized that the defeat of an incumbent in the general election accompanied by the defeat of the incumbent's party would not be a significant predictor of superintendent turnover. It was simply a matter of one party being turned out for another. This phenomena was closely related to hypothesis 1 in which it was predicted that candidates' success went hand in hand with party success. Hypothesis 2c observed the defeat of an incumbent school board member in the general election in which the remainder of the incumbent's party enjoyed victory. This defeat, it was hypothesized, would be the most accurate indicator of involuntary superintendent turnover of any electoral defeat studied. This type of defeat was anticipated to be the strongest indication that the policies of that incumbent were not viewed with favor by the public. The tendency to vote for candidates of the same party was overcome by this strong distaste for the policies of a particular incumbent candidate.

Hypothesis 2b identified a third category of incumbent defeat. This hypothesis identified the defeat of the incumbent school board member in his party's primary election. It hypothesized that incumbent defeat in this election would predict superintendent turnover although not as accurately as the defeat described in hypothesis 2c. It was felt that the absence of partisan politics in the primary election would focus attention on educational issues. Thus, defeat would represent repudiation of educational policies supported by the superintendent and implemented by the board.

Research Procedures

The study was set in 192 Pennsylvania school districts. Each district was governed by a nine-member school board that hired and fired the superintendent. Three of the nine members on each board were elected to six-year terms each odd-numbered year. These elections were held coincidentally with other local elections. In 1967, the general elections were held on November 7, and the new board held its organizational meeting on December 4. Pennsylvania school board directors are elected in partisan contests. To obtain a position on the November ballot, the candidate must have first secured his party's nomination in the spring primary election held on May 16, in 1967. Thus, Pennsylvania school board incumbents twice face the danger of defeat in their quest for reelection.

All districts in the sample had superintendents as their chief school administrator rather than a supervising principal who reported to a county superintendent of schools. The superintendent was independent of the county superintendent and operated on a four-year contract. The four-year contracts of all superintendents begin and expire on the same date, July 1, of every fourth year.

Thus, the contract period examined in this study originated on July 1, 1966, the date that all superintendents signed their four-year contracts. These contracts came up for renewal on July 1, 1970. During

this four-year period, the contracts could not be extended but could be terminated. All superintendents are elected in April, but the contract period does not begin until July 1.

This study, then, examined the election of 1967 and the three-year period following it. The first opportunity for incumbent school board defeat in 1967 was the May primary election. The general election was held in November at which time composition of the new board was determined. But, the new board did not meet and organize itself until December 4, 1967. It was at this point that the three-year period began during which superintendent turnover could be explained by incumbent school board member defeat occurring in 1967. This study, therefore, was concerned with explaining involuntary superintendent turnover occurring between December 4, 1967, and December 4, 1970. This span of time included July 1, 1970, the date on which all superintendents of Pennsylvania signed contracts if they were to retain their position for another four-year period. It was anticipated that most of the superintendency turnovers would take place at this time.

Collection of Data

In order to test hypothesis 1, party victory was operationally defined as a party having its candidates elected or receiving a majority of the vote in more than one-half of all contests appearing on the ballot in that school district. Data regarding election results was collected from local newspaper accounts of the election. Where local newspapers did not carry the election results, the necessary information was secured via telephone calls to the school district. Data relating to superintendent turnover was obtained at the Pennsylvania State Department of Education. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to determine if the superintendency turnover was of a voluntary or involuntary nature. It was decided that this information could most adequately be obtained through a questionnaire completed by the successor superintendent. Questionnaires were sent to successor superintendents. In the case of questionnaires not returned, the appropriate district was contacted by telephone and its

response was recorded. Thus, a response was obtained from all successor superintendents in districts in which superintendent turnover had occurred during the period of the study.

Data Analysis

The chi square was selected as the statistical measure to be used in testing the significance of the relationship between incumbent school board member defeat and involuntary superintendent turnover. A two-by-two chi square utilizing the yates correction was employed. A probability of .05 was selected as the level of significance to be accepted in the study. In testing hypothesis 1, useable data was available from 192 districts and hypotheses 2, 2a, 2b, and 2c, were tested with data drawn from 165 districts. Districts were randomly selected with regard to size categories, urban-rural location, and geographical distribution within the state.

Hypothesis 1 hypothesized that: In partisan, general elections in Pennsylvania, more school board candidates win when their party wins than when their party loses.

Table 1 presents the data concerning the relationship between individual and party success or failure. It is interesting to note that the data strongly supports hypothesis 1.

Table 1. Candidate Victory-Candidate Defeat vs. Candidate's Party Victory-Candidate's Party Defeat.

		Candidate: Wins	Candidate: Loses	
Party	Wins	775	132	(907)
	Loses	132	775	(907)
		(907)	(907)	N = 1814

$X^2 = 908.8$

$X^2.001 = 10.83$

Hypothesis 2 declared that: The defeat of an incumbent school board member in Pennsylvania's partisan, general election is not necessarily reflective of community dissatisfaction with the school board and its policy to the degree that involuntary superintendent turnover results.

Again, the hypothesis was supported by the data. Chi square analysis failed to identify a significant relationship between the defeat of an incumbent school board member in the general election and involuntary superintendent turnover at the .05 level of significance. However, a refinement of hypothesis 2 did result in obtaining a level of significance. Inasmuch as victory in the party primary was necessary to be eligible for competition at the general election level, all participants in the general election had already survived one potential defeat. Candidates in the general election had already been victorious in the party's primary election. Voters in these districts had had the opportunity to defeat incumbents with whom they associated unpopular educational policies. Thus, it followed that voters in those districts in which incumbent defeat had occurred in the spring primary had voiced their opposition to existing board policy, and further incumbent defeat in the general election was not necessary to express that opposition. Under the terms of this study, the superintendent was already eligible to be dismissed. However, in those districts in which incumbent primary defeat had not taken place, the voters had retained the opportunity to defeat incumbent board members in the general election and in so doing, expressed their dissatisfaction with board policy. There were 102 districts in which incumbents had not suffered defeat in the primary election. The relationship between the two variables in these districts was subjected to chi square analysis and found to be significant at the .05 level of probability. This analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Involuntary Turnover-No Involuntary Turnover Excluding Districts Experiencing Incumbent Defeat in the Primary vs. Incumbent Defeat-No Incumbent Defeat in the General Election Regardless of Party Success.

		Involuntary Turnover: Yes	Involuntary Turnover: No	
Incumbent Defeat	Yes	10	24	(34)
	No	7	61	(68)
		(17)	(85)	N = 102

$X^2 = 4.64$

$X^2.05 = 3.84$

The relationship between incumbent defeat in the general election and involuntary superintendent turnover was further strengthened in those districts in which primary defeat had not occurred when data from only those districts which experienced subsequent superintendent turnover was examined. Table 3 demonstrates this relationship.

Table 3. Involuntary Turnover-No Involuntary Turnover in Districts in Which Superintendent Turnover Occurred Excluding Districts Experiencing Incumbent Defeat in the Primary vs. Incumbent Defeat-No Incumbent Defeat in the General Election Regardless of Party Success.

		Involuntary Turnover: Yes	Involuntary Turnover: No	
Incumbent Defeat	Yes	10	3	(13)
	No	7	19	(26)
		(17)	(22)	N = 39

$X^2 = 6.64$

$X^2.01 = 6.64$

Thus, in testing hypothesis 2, it was found that incumbent defeat in the general election was not necessarily a predictor of subsequent superintendent dismissal. However, under certain circumstances, the independent variable was found to be a significant predictor of turnover.

Hypothesis 2a stated that: The defeat of a renominated, incumbent school board member accompanied by the defeat of the rest of the incumbent's party will not signal involuntary superintendent turnover within three years.

Again, the data supported the hypothesis. No significant relationship was found between the defeat of an incumbent board member in the general election at the same time that the incumbent's party was being defeated and subsequent superintendent dismissal. Likewise, a significant relationship was not found by studying only those districts in which superintendent dismissal was eventually experienced.

Hypothesis 2b stated that: The defeat of an incumbent school board member in a primary election will signal involuntary superintendent turnover within three years.

Analysis of the data found a relationship significant at the .05 level of probability between incumbent defeat in the primary election and subsequent superintendent dismissal. The chi square treatment of the relationship is recorded in Table 4.

Table 4. Total Involuntary Turnover-No Involuntary Turnover vs. Incumbent Defeat-No Incumbent Defeat in the Primary.

		Involuntary Turnover		
		Yes	No	
Incumbent Defeat[a]	Yes	19	40	(59)
	No	17	87	(104)
		(36)	(127)	N = 163

$X^2 = 4.77$ $X^2.05 = 3.84$

[a]Complete information on two districts was lacking.

The relationship between incumbent defeat in the primary election and involuntary superintendent turnover was determined to be at a higher level of significance when only those districts that went on to experience superintendent turnover was examined. The relationship between the two variables was significant at the .01 level. Table 5 examines the relationship as it was observed in only those districts in which superintendent turnover occurred during the time of the study.

Table 5. Involuntary Turnover-No Involuntary Turnover in Districts in Which Superintendent Turnover Occurred vs. Incumbent Defeat-No Incumbent Defeat in the Primary.

		Involuntary Turnover: Yes	Involuntary Turnover: No	
Incumbent Defeat[a]	Yes	19	5	(24)
	No	17	24	(41)
		(36)	(29)	N = 65

$X^2 = 7.72$

$X^2.01 = 6.64$

[a]Complete information on two districts was lacking.

In hypothesis 2c, it was posited that: the defeat of a renominated incumbent school board member in the partisan, general election accompanied by the defeat of the rest of the incumbent's party will be the strongest indicator of involuntary superintendent turnover within three years.

Analysis of the data resulted in a rejection of this hypothesis. No significant relationship was found between the two variables.

Ancillary Findings

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding of the study was not the result of the testing of any of the above hypotheses. As the collection of data took place, it became evident that another independent variable should have been developed in explaining superintendent turnover. In the newly created hypotheses, all references to the partisan nature of the election including categories of incumbent defeat (such as individual defeat accompanied by party victory or individual defeat accompanied by party defeat) were omitted. The hypothesis tested the relationship between simple incumbent defeat regardless of other partisan victories or defeats and superintendent turnover. This relationship is examined in Table 6.

Table 6. Total Involuntary Turnover-No Involuntary Turnover vs. Incumbent Defeat-No Incumbent Defeat in the Primary and General Elections.

		Involuntary Turnover: Yes	Involuntary Turnover: No	
Incumbent Defeat[a]	Yes	29	64	(93)
	No	7	61	(68)
		(36)	(125)	N = 161

$X^2 = 9.60$

$X^2.01 = 6.64$

[a]Complete information on four districts was lacking.

It will be noted that a relationship significant at the .01 level was found in observing this relationship.

Discussion

Prior to the examination of the data collected for this study, it was expected that the defeat of an incumbent school board member in the

general election accompanied by the victory of his party in that election would be a very positive signal of upcoming incumbent superintendent involuntary turnover. It was expected that other antecedents to superintendent turnover would also be identified. It was hypothesized that incumbent school board member defeat in the primary election would be a strong indicator of upcoming superintendent turnover as well. Furthermore, it was anticipated that the defeat of a school board member accompanied by the defeat of the rest of his party would have little bearing on the status of the incumbent superintendent.

As the data in the study was investigated, it became apparent that the defeat of an incumbent board member in the general election accompanied by the victory of the incumbent's party was not a strong indicator of future superintendent turnover. In fact, no significant relationship was established between the two variables. Likewise, the incumbent's defeat accompanied by the defeat of his party was not found to be a forerunner of superintendent turnover. It was found, however, that incumbent school board member defeat in the primary election was a strong predictor of future superintendent involuntary turnover. Additionally, the ancillary finding of this study was that incumbent defeat as an inclusive category, and not divided into any subgrouping, was in fact the most significant predictor.

The benefit of hindsight enables the researcher to explain the phenomena discovered in the study. A party primary election in many ways resembles a nonpartisan general election. In a primary election, the partisan factor is eliminated as completely as is possible in a partisan setting. As much as is possible, the individual candidate is evaluated in the primary election. There is little relationship to partisan activity other than the basic requirement that the voters claim membership in the same party as the candidate for whom they are voting. In voting in the Republican primary, a Republican voter theoretically reviews the qualities of the individual candidate. A similar phenomena is demonstrated by the behavior of voters in nonpartisan general

elections. The voters are viewing the individual candidate's strengths and weaknesses without regard to the party to which they may happen to belong. States in which school board members are not elected on a partisan basis generally do not have primary elections previous to the general election. Thus, both the primary election in states with partisan elections and the general election in states without partisan activity provide the voters with their first opportunity to evaluate incumbent candidates for office. Defeat in the primary election in a partisan election represents the first opportunity for the voter to eliminate a distasteful incumbent just as does the defeat of the incumbent in a general election and nonpartisan elections. Thus, the significance of the relationship between partisan defeat in a primary election and subsequent nonvoluntary superintendent turnover need not be interpreted to be influenced by the partisan nature of the election. Rather, it merely represents the first opportunity for dissatisfied voters and district residents to initiate the process leading to the dismissal of the superintendent. The occurrence of the defeat within the context of partisan activity has very little effect on the relationship to future superintendent turnover. The incidence of incumbent defeat is the pervasive factor.

However, it is interesting to note that more than one-half of all incumbent defeats observed in this study took place in the primary election. This would seem to indicate that if there is dissatisfaction with the incumbent, the chances are good that he will be eliminated at the first opportunity by the voters.

Thus, this study substantiates but differs little from the findings of Lutz and Walden. They found that the defeat of incumbents in the first opportunity provided voters signaled involuntary superintendent turnover. The present study observed the same phenomena. The work of Lutz and Walden is further substantiated by the ancillary finding of this study. Simple incumbent school board member defeat regardless of the circumstances within which the defeat occurred is the best single predictor of superintendent turnover. It is a better predictor than incumbent defeat

in a general election accompanied by the victory of his party; it is a better predictor than the defeat of an incumbent in a general election accompanied by his party's defeat; and it is a better predictor than defeat of an incumbent in a primary election. Furthermore, when only districts experiencing superintendent turnover were analyzed, the relationship between incumbent defeat and involuntary turnover increased to a significance level of .001. This level of significance matched that found in the original, nonpartisan elections studied. This would indicate that inasmuch as the relationship found in this study were similar to the relationship between the two variables established in nonpartisan election studies, the relationship was affected very little by the partisan nature of the school board elections in Pennsylvania.

Summary

Analysis of the data collected in this study revealed that incumbent defeat broadly defined as the defeat of an incumbent in either the primary or general elections is the most accurate predictor of involuntary superintendent turnover. Increased predictive accuracy cannot be obtained by examining any specific category of incumbent defeat. Thus, the findings in previous studies taking place in nonpartisan school board elections were found to be equally applicable in partisan school district politics. Nothing in the present study indicated that the relationship between incumbent school board member defeat and involuntary superintendent turnover is influenced by the partisan nature of Pennsylvania school board elections.

Footnotes

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2. Barry O. Miller, "Effects of Cross-Filing on School Board Incumbents In Pennsylvania's Elections" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1975).

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